

FAMOUS WATER-COLOUR PAINTERS
PETER DE WINT



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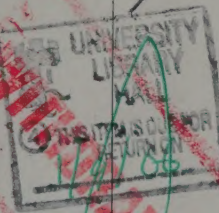
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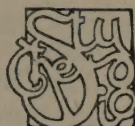
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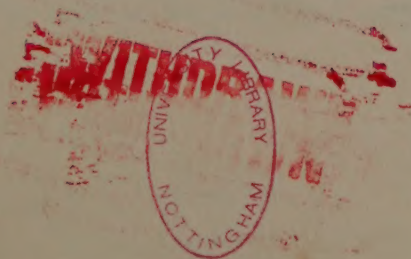
FAMOUS WATER-COLOUR PAINTERS
V.—PETER DE WINT

INTRODUCTION BY
MARTIN HARDIE, R.I., R.E.



1929

“THE STUDIO” LIMITED
44 LEICESTER SQ., LONDON, W.C.2



Famous Water-Colour Painters

- I. FRANK BRANGWYN, R.A.
- II. W. RUSSELL FLINT, A.R.A.
- III. J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.
- IV. RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON
- V. PETER DE WINT

In Preparation

- VI. THOMAS ROWLANDSON

(Ready 28th August)

EVERY morning of his life, even when on his sketching tours, Peter de Wint read the Scriptures and wrote out a prayer before breakfast. "And a damned good custom, too!" as the great Duke of Cambridge said when his host explained that it was the household habit to unite in family prayer before breakfast. But one doubts whether even a Bishop can steadfastly write a daily pre-breakfast prayer and remain human. Even a Bishop, one thinks, would occasionally, under such conditions, be "short" with his butler or even with his devoted wife before partaking of his bacon and eggs. It was no surprise, therefore, to hear long ago from a faithful source that De Wint suffered from post-prandial fits of ill-temper. However that may be, the custom of daily devotion before breakfast does connote that, for an artist, De Wint lived a strangely even, unchequered and uneventful life. That this was actually the case is shown by a pamphlet,¹ written by his widow, very simply and artlessly, in tribute to his memory. This little paper-bound book, privately printed much later and extremely rare, is the main source of knowledge about the actual events of De Wint's career.

In the case of a Van Gogh or a Gauguin, biography may help to explain their art: biography may be criticism. That is not so with De Wint. In his case art and life are separable. De Wint's whole history is in his work, and where there is no oppressive quantity of facts about his life, one may just indicate the few milestones of his working career, and pass more easily to the work itself.

De Wint was descended from an old Dutch family of De Windts, who were merchants of wealth and position in Amsterdam. Their coat-of-arms, consisting of "Four heads proper blowing four winds," was appropriate, not only to those merchant-adventurers who migrated to foreign lands, but to their descendant, who was essentially an artist of the open air.² Among those forebears a John Peter de Wint won a considerable fortune in New England, and sent his son Henry to Leyden and London to be trained as a physician. In his medical career, Henry, having become estranged from his father, drifted in 1781 or thereabouts to Stone in Staffordshire, and there Peter de Wint, his fourth son, was born in 1784.

Partly to give De Wint his place in the history of British Water-Colour, and partly to explain how water-colour art rose on the high crest of a wave in the early part of the nineteenth century, it is perhaps worth while to give the following birth dates: J. M. W. Turner, 1775; Thomas Girtin, 1775; John Constable, 1776;

¹ *A Short Memoir of Peter de Wint and William Hilton, R.A.*, by Harriet de Wint. Printed for private circulation by Miss Tatlock, c. 1912.

² Ruskin, who was tepid about De Wint, and understood him as little as he understood Rembrandt, at least said: "De Wint makes me feel as if I were walking in the fields."

John Varley, 1778; John Sell Cotman, 1782; Samuel Prout, 1783; David Cox, 1783; P. de Wint, 1784.

From his boyhood De Wint was passionately devoted to drawing, and, in spite of the narrowness of the family means, was allowed to take lessons from a local drawing-master. His father, with some misgiving, surrendered to his son's desire to abandon the intended study of medicine, and sent him to London in 1802 as an apprentice to John Raphael Smith, the famous mezzotint-engraver, who was the close friend and companion of George Morland. On a Friday, and on April 1st, regardless of superstitions, Peter de Wint set out to live under his master's roof in King Street, Covent Garden. There he found, as a fellow-apprentice, William Hilton, and the two were scarcely ever separated till Hilton's death in 1839. Their work was entirely different in character and subject, but their union in ideas and habits was very close, and was cemented by De Wint's marriage in 1810 to Hilton's sister, Harriet. Four years before the marriage, De Wint and Hilton went together to live in Broad Street, Golden Square. Here they were neighbours of John Varley, six years senior to De Wint, and from him De Wint received much counsel and instruction that must have been most profitable to the younger man. For Varley was a capable and enthusiastic teacher, whose value may be judged by two of his remarks handed down through his pupils. One was that "Nature requires cooking," and the other, as he looked at a pupil's drawing: "Did you ever see a barber sharpen a razor? That's what your drawing wants—the decision and the smacks." From Varley, no doubt, De Wint absorbed some of his breadth and boldness of technique, and he was fortunate, about the same time, in becoming one of the group of students who frequented Dr. Monro's house in Adelphi Terrace. There he found his chief inspiration in the drawings of Girtin. In 1810, the year of his marriage, he became an Associate of the Old Water Colour Society, and the rest of his life, "uneventful as the course of a Dutch river," is merely a story of domestic happiness, work with pupils, and the yearly sojourns in his chosen sketching districts. "I do so love painting," he used to exclaim. "I am never so happy as when looking at Nature. Mine is a beautiful profession."

Through a great part of his life, De Wint won little recognition for his work, whether in oil or in water-colour, and even now his mastery of oil is too little realised. It is all to the credit of John Raphael Smith that from the first he showed belief in De Wint's power of painting in oil, and cancelled his pupil's indentures on the sole condition that for two years he should paint in oil nine subjects a year, of stipulated size—to be his master's property. But in the years to come De Wint's oil landscapes, sent to the Royal Academy,

were rejected or skied. Buried away in a loft at the time of his death, the "Woody Landscape" and "The Cornfield" ultimately found their way to the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they hang worthily next to the Constable room, and, even though his water-colours should all perish, would still establish De Wint as one of the great landscape-painters of our land.

For his water-colours, through much of his life, he felt himself fortunate in getting a guinea a drawing; and at the very height of his career, twenty to thirty guineas was about his average demand. Many tales are told of his shrewdness as a business man, and it is even related that on finding it necessary to sketch some cows in a pupil's drawing, he raised his hour's fee from a guinea to five-and-thirty shillings. Time's revenges have rarely been more emphatic than in the case of De Wint, and one wonders what would have been his feelings, as artist and business-man alike, could he have known that within thirty years of his death, at the Quilter Sale of 1875, his "Southall, Notts," would sell for £1,732 10s. 0d. Of his brother artists, Constable, who bought a water-colour by De Wint in 1827, alone seems to have recognised his worth. There is pleasure also in recalling that in that same year one of those who apparently understood De Wint best was John Clare, cowherd and peasant poet. During his brief flash of success and notoriety, Clare made a descent upon the Society of London just as Burns had done in Edinburgh, and there made the acquaintance of the artist. After his return he wrote a charming and diffident letter begging for "a bit of your genius to hang up in my cottage. What I mean is one of those scraps which you consider nothing, after having used them, and that lie littering your study. For nothing would appear so valuable to me as one of those rough sketches, taken in the fields, that breathe the living freshness of the open air and sunshine, where the harmony of earth, air, and sky forms such a happy unison of greens and greys, that a flat bit of scenery on a few inches of paper appears so many miles." A fine and true description, that: and all the finer because written from the heart by one who knew nothing of the jargon of criticism, but had spent his life upon the soil, in that living freshness of open air and sunshine of which he wrote. And it is characteristic of De Wint, the man of prayer and the man of business, that the poor poet's pleading won no response. Again, to show how De Wint struck his contemporaries, we may quote from Samuel Palmer's notebook of 1850. Palmer speaks of seeking a "new style," and he adds: "Try something like the solid BLOCKS of sober colour in De Wint."

While it is satisfying to know that artists so different in outlook as Constable and Samuel Palmer could appreciate De Wint's power, the fact remains that throughout his life he was passing rich on an

income gained chiefly from teaching amateurs. We have only to read Jane Austen to see how seriously, in the opening years of last century, drawing was regarded as a necessary accomplishment, male or female. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianna rejoices that Elinor's engagement is delayed. "I shall not lose you so soon, and Edward will have greater opportunity of improving that natural taste for your favourite pursuit, which must be so indispensably necessary to your future felicity. Oh! if he should be so far stimulated by your genius as to learn to draw himself, how delightful it would be!" It is difficult to believe that Jane Austen was born in the same year as Turner, but so it was, and *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, shows just the atmosphere in which De Wint, then twenty-seven, began his career as a drawing-master. By 1827—but he was then over forty and a full member of the Old Water Colour Society—his price for lessons had risen from five shillings to one guinea an hour. That he had whole bevvies of aristocratic ladies as his pupils is shown by inscriptions in some of his sketch-books. One of these books in the Victoria and Albert Museum contains notes with each sketch, indicating pupils to whom he had supplied this or a similar subject for copying. A pupil more noteworthy than the ordinary amateur was Samuel Austin, the well-known painter of sea and coast subjects. Austin was a poor clerk with a keen love of sketching; and some charitable person gave him the means of receiving three precious lessons from the great De Wint. When the last lesson came to an end, the young student burst into tears, and it is vain to search for any record that the great De Wint gave him three more lessons without fees! With regard to De Wint's influence on amateurs whom he taught, Mr. Randall Davies^a has done some interesting research. At Belton House, in Lincolnshire, where De Wint gave instruction to Lord Brownlow's family, Mr. Davies found a drawing with a mass of shipping on the right foreground and a single boat on the left, inscribed "Venice, about 1848, by Mr. Cheney, De Wint's best pupil." It had been sent to London in 1887 for framing, and came back with a note that "but for the un-Venetian little boat it might have been by De Wint." But the boat was by De Wint! Perhaps he charged five shillings extra for that boat! And while speaking of De Wint's influence on his pupils, I may relate an experience which also shows that the so-called "expert" would be wiser if he admitted more often that the one thing he knows is that he knows nothing. A lady brought me a water-colour wishing to know who the painter was, and for what amount it should be insured. To all intents and purposes, it was a superb De Wint. The subject

^a *Peter de Wint*, by Randall Davies, with a List of his Exhibited Works, compiled by Basil S. Long. The Old Water-Colour Society's Club, First Annual Volume, 1923-1924.

was "The Old Bridge at Lincoln"—a favourite sketching place of De Wint. It had all the brave generosity that is as conspicuous in his work as it was absent in his life. It was in his rich sombre colouring, with indisputable hints of the Indian red and purple lake which figure in his severely limited palette. It might well be insured for £500. And yet—caution prevailed over dogma—what about those figures: were they quite De Wint?—might we open up the frame and see if by chance there was any note on the back? A note there was, an autograph note showing that the drawing was by Frederick Nash. Yet there was a mystery, for Frederick Nash, a dull and uninteresting painter with an entirely different outlook, could apparently never have produced that drawing. And then research showed that De Wint and Nash were working together at Lincoln in 1810, and that both exhibited their Lincoln drawings, of which this could be definitely identified as one, at the Old Water Colour Society in 1811. The mystery was solved. I could picture De Wint—the post-prandial, aggressive De Wint—standing over Nash and saying: "But, my dear fellow, don't be so niggling and fussy about it. Take a big full brush like this——" Perhaps there was more of De Wint in that drawing than was indicated by the signature on the back. But the insurance value came down with a bump!

De Wint's palette has been mentioned, and there is no doubt that his wise limitation of pigments accounted for much of the simplicity and directness of his work. While Girtin used fifteen colours, De Wint's palette was confined to the following ten pigments: Indian red, purple lake, yellow ochre, gamboge, brown, pink, burnt sienna, sepia, Prussian blue and indigo. He employed two brushes, both large: one with a fine point, the other round and well worn. He used a thickish, rough paper, usually "old Creswick," and no one knew better than De Wint how the roughness of a paper can be used to give luminosity to an even wash. He was at his best when every part of his work was laid on with a full, flowing brush, and a rich mosaic of added colour was floated in, to avoid all second touching on a dry ground. Thus we get the untroubled freshness and the full richness of bloom that lend so much charm and distinction to his art. While he rarely washed down any mass of colour to obtain gradation, he did sometimes put a second wash over a dry ground; and a close examination of his work shows how skilfully he used a sharp pen-knife, first to gain a broken effect in his trees by scraping irregularly his second upper wash; and next, to gain sparkle by flicking out high lights where the sky gleams through foliage.

Of the eight examples of De Wint's work, reproduced in colour herewith, there is no need to speak in detail. The slightest and

most spontaneous of them, such as "Cottage at Aldbury," "St. Alban's Abbey," "Streatham Common," and the "View near Oxford," show him at his very best. He was always at his best when his work was done quickly and freely at one sitting; in drawings, where he knew when to stop, though parts were literally unfinished; when he left the foreground to look after itself, just covering his paper with suggestive hints of form and colour, seeking no adventitious aid from clumps of burdock or any dimplement given by earth or stone. In drawings such as these⁴ he is infinitely greater than when he tries to tickle the public palate by introducing delicate and elaborate ingenuities of form and style. In his more laborious efforts he was treading—against his own conviction—the bad road of giving pleasure to a patron or to the half-educated who understand perfection of finish alone. He is one of the great technicians of water-colour, one of those who can make colour sing, one of the few who can keep even his darks transparent, luminous and sparkling. No other artist has ever set on paper with more meaning and more purpose that "brave beautiful blot" of untroubled colour, from a full-flowing brush, which as it dries out, transparent and rich in bloom, is the charm and essence of water-colour art. And to De Wint's credit we may remember that this most conventional of men in his daily life was daring and unconventional in his art; that he brought into the art of water-colour something new, something unknown to Turner and Girtin and Cox. He is not an echo: he is a voice. He had "a beautiful profession," and out of it he produced things of lasting beauty.

MARTIN HARDIE.

⁴ And in drawings which he spread out, with Koninck-like panorama, over the open double page of his oblong sketch-book. One wishes that the exigencies of a page the size of this book did not prevent the inclusion of one of his long panoramic drawings about 4 inches by 18 inches, such as the four splendid examples belonging to the Rt. Hon. C. P. Allen, or the superb "Fen Country" that was owned by the late Mr. A. T. Hollingsworth.

THE EDITOR DESIRES TO THANK MISS BOSTOCK,
SIR GEORGE AGNEW, BART., GERALD AGNEW, ESQ.,
R. W. LLOYD, ESQ., AND THE AUTHORITIES OF THE
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM AND THE NATIONAL
GALLERY WHO HAVE KINDLY ALLOWED THE
WATER-COLOURS TO BE HERE REPRODUCED.

PLATE I

" WALTHAM ABBEY "

In the collection of Miss Bostock



PLATE II

" COTTAGE AT ALDBURY "

In the collection of Miss Bostock



PLATE III

"A SCENE NEAR VENTNOR IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT"

In the collection of Miss Bostock

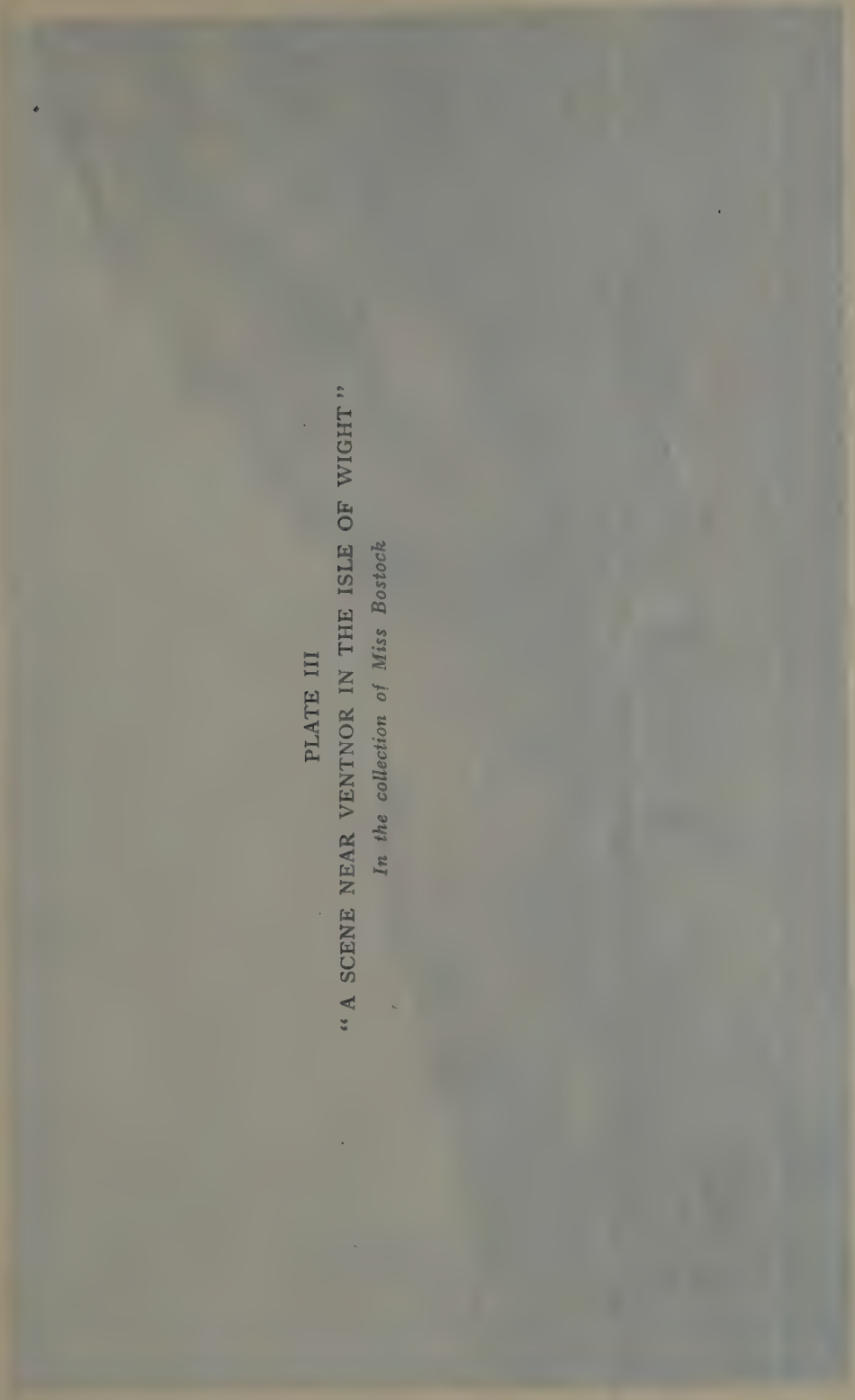




PLATE IV

" ST. ALBAN'S ABBEY "

In the collection of R. W. Lloyd, Esq.

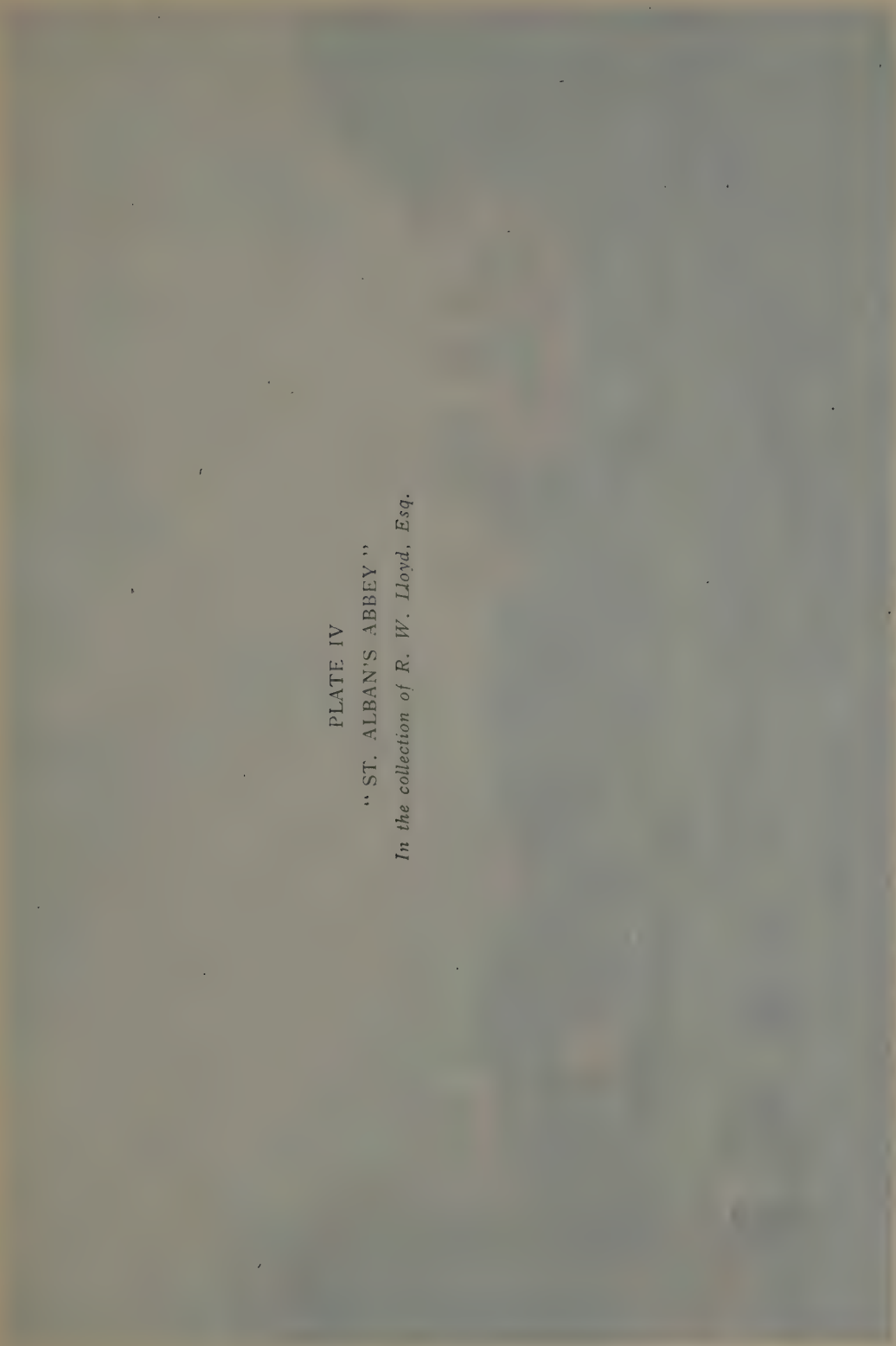




PLATE V

" STREATHAM COMMON "

In the collection of Sir George Agnew, Bart.



PLATE VI

"DOVER FROM THE DEAL ROAD"

In the collection of Gerald Agnew, Esq.

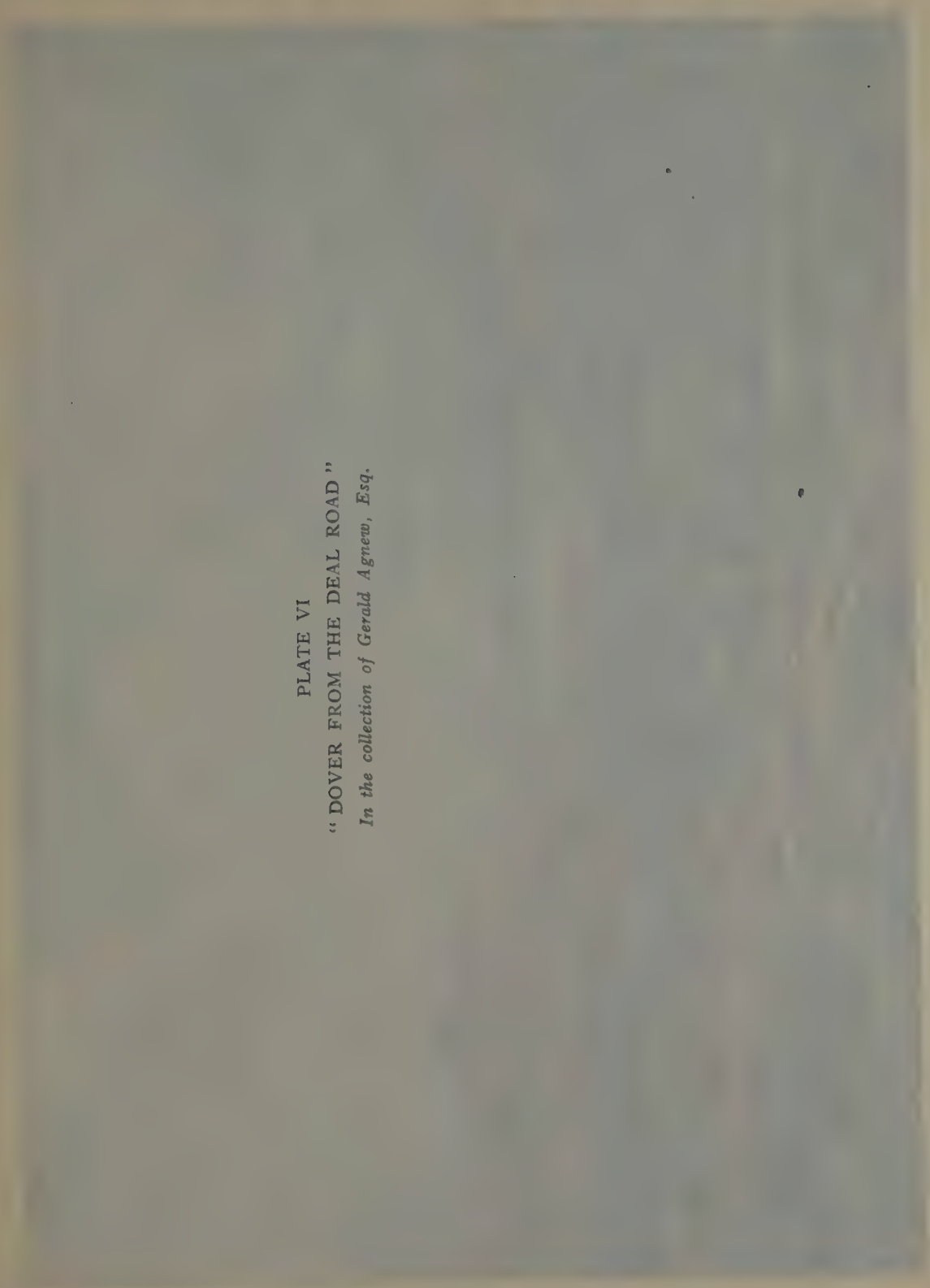




PLATE VII

"POTTER GATE, LINCOLN"

The Victoria and Albert Museum



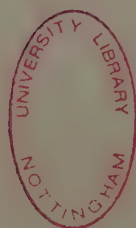
PLATE VIII

" A VIEW NEAR OXFORD "

The Victoria and Albert Museum

(Loan from the National Gallery)







KS-618-724

